

# Business Traveller Asia-Pacific

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## SPECIAL REPORTS »

### Dangerous liasons

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Dream posting. The term conjures images of palm trees, cocktails by the pool and white-sand beaches, or perhaps a bustling Asian city where both a lucrative job and high-adrenaline nightlife proceed at breakneck speed. For the second definition, Hong Kong and Singapore admirably fit the mould. But as developing nations continue to gain ground, and previous economic backwaters emerge blinking onto the world stage, not all postings abroad are a dream. In fact, some may prove to be a nightmare.

Parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and Central America, for instance, can be downright dangerous for foreign businesspeople, and to arrive at such places with no thought given to personal safety is nothing short of gross stupidity.

Fortunately, risky locations can be rendered relatively safe by means of some careful preparation and judicious contingency planning. With so many people on the move, there's no shortage of companies specialising in risk assessment and personal security.

Whether a company is outsourcing its security arrangements, or conducting them in-house, the first step should always be identifying the risk involved. Threats fall fairly neatly into broad categories, which include: theft, assault, kidnapping, extortion, credit card and other fraud, health, fire and accidents.

Gavin Greenwood, director of information services at Hong Kong-based Allan & Associates business advisory consultancy, is keen to point out that solutions should be tailor-made to the risk. "The principal role of companies such as ours in helping assure the safety and security of a business traveller is to prepare a threat assessment for the company regarding their employee's proposed travel plans and then advise on how best to mitigate the identified risks.

"If the risk is low to moderate, this would involve a written assessment and/or a direct briefing if requested," he explains. "If the risk was identified as high or extreme, then the advice would include strong recommendations for close protection."

Once the risks are identified, responses fall broadly into categories. Says Singapore-based co-ordinating security manager Asia Pacific for International SOS and Control Risks, Victor Chin: "We can assist in setting up specialist support, including planning, training, logistics and on-the-ground support. During travel we provide 24/7 emergency-response specialist support, via telephone or in person if needed. In the worst case, we can assist in evacuations."

On-the-ground support may translate as bodyguards or specialist drivers. One man who's had plenty of unwanted experience in this realm is Simon Brennan, an architect and project manager who's worked on oil and gas projects around the world for companies such as Total, frequently in countries that most of us would avoid like the plague. In some of these places, his journey to work has involved high-speed armed convoys. When not at work he and other employees have been confined to base, more often than not a gated compound with armed guards and CCTV cameras. When working in West Africa recently, he was faced with a typically alarming situation.

"My colleagues and I were going to check out a city apartment for rent one evening, in a safe zone close to the French embassy," says Brennan. "Our car was stopped at a checkpoint by the traffic police, who are notorious for extorting money. A cop claimed he saw us make an illegal U-turn and wanted us to pay a fine. We objected, and called our security team to come and rescue us, so we closed the car windows and locked the doors while we waited for assistance.

"The police lost their cool after 20 minutes and started shouting and making threatening gestures. Then one of them let the air out of our tyres. Our company driver put the car in reverse and sped away against oncoming traffic while the cops chased on foot, aiming their AK47s at us. We managed to get to the relative safety of the French embassy, inflate the tyres and go on our way."

Without a driver who was not only skilled behind the wheel but also able to keep a clear head, this situation could easily have turned out very badly indeed.

The International SOS Group also specialises in risk assessment and extraction of personnel, if the latter proves necessary. Extraction is, of course, a measure of last resort and one that could prove not only costly but is likely to incur its own risks. Threats that the company tackles may include those to health, as well as the more obvious examples of kidnap, theft and assault.

"On a daily basis we assist multiple clients to avoid trouble during international travel," says Chin. "This may be as simple as highlighting a high crime area of a city and advising against a hotel, through to evacuating a client impacted by the Ebola situation in West Africa."

Assessing risk goes much further than a quick look at the social and geopolitical situation. In order to both assess and mitigate, it's crucial to determine the nature and scope of a visit to a risky location. With that in mind, risk-assessment organisations will undertake an extensive analysis of the situation.

“The first consideration for a company sending personnel into a complex business environment – which could range from a location with a high risk of crime to a highly unstable and violent political environment – is to clearly define the purpose and duration of the visit or deployment,” says Greenwood. “This enables us to fully assess all stages of the actual and potential threats to personnel and prepare detailed recommendations on how the threats can be mitigated and their personnel kept secure. “At the individual level, business travellers should ensure they have resilient and, where possible, tested communications with their company and/or family. They should ensure their passport details are readily available in the event of loss – the simplest means of enduring access is to email scanned-in copies to a personal account that can be easily retrieved anywhere – and ensure they have access to funds in the event of any loss of credit cards or cash.”

For some, the notion of getting out of trouble may produce mental images of Chuck Norris-style escapades, whereby the plucky businessman fights off a dozen bad guys using techniques favoured by the special forces. But would-be ninjas beware. As with so many areas of life, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and fighting back will very likely result in the victim coming off worse. So while self-defence courses may be of limited use, awareness training usually proves to be considerably more effective in most situations.

“General self awareness, in the form of a training session, is valuable in helping identify and contextualise risks through presentation and discussion,” says Greenwood. “For example, our training sessions for executives who travel frequently give greater emphasis to the threat from traffic accidents and fire than that from terrorism.”

Adds Chin, “Risk-awareness courses, training and planning are very useful, depending on the circumstances. This is strongly recommended for a high-risk location like Pakistan, but perhaps not necessary for a low-risk destination like Australia. Self-defence courses, on the other hand, are not typically recommended, as it may escalate the situation and cause more harm than good.”

In some instances, it's necessary to send a VIP or high-profile member of a company into a particularly risky environment. In situations such as a groundbreaking ceremony, or the signing of a major contract, only the organ grinder will do, not the monkey. In these situations, good security is possible, but only if it's short and sharp.

“A high level of security can be achieved for a short visit by a senior executive into a hostile environment if the timing of the trip and the itinerary are restricted to the minimum number of people and on-the-ground security is discreet,” says Greenwood. “However, the longer personnel are in a dangerous location – as might be the case with construction crews – the more complex the security challenge becomes, as criminal or political groups have longer to plan and mobilise resources against them.”

It’s worth noting here that a good measure of common sense goes a long way when it comes to safety, and that a number of unfortunate situations may be down to the actions of the person involved.

“Individual travellers should also be aware that, apart from the most extreme conditions, the greatest threat to their own security and safety is likely to be their own conduct and behaviour,” concludes Greenwood. “With the exception of traffic accidents, most serious incidents involving business travellers have been the result of a failure to maintain a low profile – which includes respecting the local community and behaving with moderation.”